

# The Use of Deliberative Mini-Publics in Local Government

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# What is deliberation?

- “Mutual communication that involves weighting and reflecting on preferences, values, and interests regarding matters of common concern.” – Mansbridge (2015, 27), adapted from Dryzek (2000, 76)
- **Exchanging reasons** for preferences and decisions.
- NOT a debate, the goal of which is to win.
- The goal in deliberation is to solve problems.
- Consensus isn't required but it helps to think of it as the objective.

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- Polls get feedback from **representative** samples of the public but, particularly on complex issues, they are **not well-informed**.
- Town hall meetings provide feedback from **informed** (or at least very interested) residents but they are **not representative** of the public.

# Examples of deliberative fora around the world

- Canada – 2004 (British Columbia) and 2007 (Ontario) citizens assemblies on reforming the electoral system
- Belgium – Ostbelgien model; permanent citizen council that helps set the agenda for the regional parliament
- Madrid, Spain – short-lived City Observatory; citizen panel that made recommendations to the city council
- Ireland – 2012-2014 Convention on the Constitution (led to marriage equality referendum) and 2016-2018 Irish Citizens Assembly (led to abortion referendum)

# Deliberative bodies in the U.S.

- Minnesota – Citizens juries first developed here in the 1970s
- Oregon – Citizens Initiative Review panel; reviews ballot initiatives and generates statement containing key facts and best reasons to vote for and against an initiative
- Stanford University – Deliberative polling; e.g., “America in One Room”
- Some cities (Fort Collins, CO; Pittsburgh, PA) claim to have held “deliberative” events, but participants are not randomly selected nor informed ahead of time; they simply deliberate at a public event

# How deliberative mini-publics work

- Topic selection – top down or bottom up
- Sample selection – stratified random sample
  - Selected individuals are offered compensation to participate
- Provision of information and expert consultation
- Deliberation
- Output

## Case Study: Future Land Use in the City of Lancaster (July 2022)

- Collaborated with the Mayor's Office and the Bureau of Planning to host a deliberative forum on future land use in the City.
- Pulled a stratified random sample of 33 Lancaster residents – representative in terms of geography (at least two participants from each of the 14 Census tracts), age, race, and education.
- Participants were given \$250 to participate.
- Participants were assigned to one of six sites in the City.
- Participants were provided with background information on regional planning; the environment; housing; transportation; economic development; and equity. They were also provided maps and background information for their assigned site.
- City's comprehensive plan consulting firm and topic experts helped develop briefing document.

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- 24 participants attended the forum.
- The forum consisted of four segments – a brief introductory plenary session and small group deliberations of (1) regional planning and the environment; (2) housing and transportation; and (3) economic development and equity concerns. A final small group deliberation and plenary identified priorities for the groups and the forum as a whole.
- Topic experts were on hand to provide brief introductory comments during plenaries and to answer questions during small group deliberations.
- Deliberation was civil, thoughtful, and grounded in participants' everyday experiences.
- Did not ask for votes or for choices among competing options.
- Results revealed near consensus preferences for more affordable housing, preserved and expanded green spaces, grocery stores and vital services (e.g., health care) within walking distance, and greater transportation options.
- Some site-specific suggestions were creative and reasonable.

# Take-aways

- Policymaker cooperation lends credibility and legitimacy to the process.
- Groups should be asked to make concrete decisions and choices.
- Selection (and participation) of individuals is difficult.
- Balanced background information and experts representing a range of (reasonable) views are vital.
- The major barrier to widespread use is cost (~\$25,000).

# Bibliography

- Dryzek, John. 2000. *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond: Liberals, Critics, Contestations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mansbridge, Jane. 2015. "A Minimalist Definition of Deliberation." In *Deliberation and Development: Rethinking the Role of Voice and Collective Action in Unequal Societies*, eds. Patrick Heller and Vijayendra Rao. Washington, DC: World Bank Group.